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Energy solutions for Utah will not be found 'blowing in wind'

By Mike Peterson


Mike Peterson

In recent months, the Salt Lake Tribune, according to a Web search, has published more than 20 articles on renewable energy, primarily wind energy in which wind power advocates suggest "Utah is falling behind" or "Utah has been slow out of the gate." Tribune readers may wonder, "What's wrong with this state when it comes to alternative energy?"

The answer is -- nothing. Utah has pursued a number of activities that promote alternative energy and the wise use of electricity. A Utah State University project in Cache Valley is converting manure into electricity. Utah's Energy Office has successfully promoted conservation and efficiency as utilities struggle to keep up with demand for electricity.

The Utah Legislature has enacted legislation to encourage alternative energy. Net metering provisions give residential customers the ability to sell excess power from self-generation. Lawmakers also provided a sales tax exemption on equipment purchased for generating facilities using renewable energy resources.

Utah does not currently have any wind farms primarily because Utah isn't one of the prime states for wind. In a not included on a list of the top 20 states for wind energy potential, compiled by the American Wind Energy Association. Therefore, wind developers have placed their initial emphasis for development on places like Texas and Wyoming where the wind resource is more consistent.

Utah's scenic vistas also pose limits on development. Some good locations for wind projects, from a technical viewpoint, are in areas where massive 200-foot-plus towers may not be welcomed by local residents and tourists. Cost-prohibitive distances to suitable transmission lines and facilities can also be a factor.

However, given these constraints, the Utah Energy Office and wind developers continue working to pinpoint locations in Utah where projects are feasible.

Another factor in the development of wind power is federal tax incentives. The

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federal production tax credit provides a credit of nearly 2 cents per kilowatt-hour for the output of wind. The impact of the federal subsidy is evident as wind development typically peaks in years just before the credit is scheduled to expire, illustrating the wind industry's heavy dependence on the federal subsidy.

Promoters of wind power have lobbied state legislators across the country to pass laws requiring utilities to purchase a

percentage of their power from renewable resources. These mandates, termed "renewable portfolio standards" or RPS, bypass customer choice and require every ratepayer to subsidize renewable projects.

Unlike the federal tax credit, however, the financial impacts on ratepayers are based on the varying circumstances of their utility, not on tax policies. Utah's Legislature has wisely chosen not to add this hidden tax to Utah ratepayers.

Any mandate translates into the possibility of requiring subsidies for projects that are not economically feasible. Moreover, because of the questionable siting issues, a mandate could mean Utah dollars end up supporting projects in other states.

Utah's rural electric cooperatives believe it is better to be open about these subsidies and give customers and utilities a choice about buying renewable energy. A good example is Utah Power's Blue Sky program, where customers can choose to buy wind energy.

Moreover, many utility companies with investments in electric generators fueled by natural gas, and where integration to the electric grid is feasible, already turn to wind resources as a way to counter the volatility of gas prices. They do so without a government mandate.

Energy answers for Utah will not be found "blowing in the wind" as suggested by a recent Tribune headline. Regardless of the number of wind farms developed in the state, the wind does not always blow and people are not prepared to go without electricity on a calm day.

Affordable, firm sources of generation must exist to keep the power flowing and Utah's business environment productive and attractive. While alternative energy projects in Utah merit consideration, significant and reasonably priced solutions for the state will be found in conservation, efficiency and the development of clean generating technologies that eliminate or employ significant reductions in regulated emissions.

Mike Peterson is executive director of the Utah Rural Electric Association, which includes 10 locally owned rural electric cooperatives that distribute power in rural areas of the state.

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